

## Johannes Brinkmann: Using Ibsen in Business Ethics<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

To celebrate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen's death, during 2006 quite a number of cultural events were launched (cf. <http://www.ibsen.net/>). The paper suggests to celebrate Ibsen as a potentially useful resource for business ethics teaching. Departing from a short presentation of Ibsen's plays *An enemy of the people* and *A doll's house* the main focus of our paper is on two selected scenes from the latter piece – both as raw material for developing scenarios for moral maturity assessment (one of them is strikingly similar to and different from Heinz' dilemma), and for teaching business students moral reflection and imagination. As an open end of the paper a few wider questions are asked about the use of literature in addition to or instead of ethics when it comes to triggering moral reflection and imagination.

## INTRODUCTION

When watching a theatre play or a movie or when reading a novel or even a poem we often find ourselves looking for essential points *beyond* the story, for main messages for us or even for others (such as our business class students). The inspiration value or even the enlightenment value of such an exercise can quite often be as high or can even be higher than reading mainstream business ethics textbooks (at least only such textbooks).

This paper takes a look at if and how parts of the plays of Norwegian Henrik Ibsen can serve as food for thought in a business ethics teaching context. Many of Ibsen's pieces are interesting and enjoyable in themselves, and potentially useful for triggering moral conflict awareness, empathy and reflection. The paper starts with a taste of Ibsen and offers then various debriefing steps.

## HENRIK IBSEN

Norwegian Henrik Ibsen was born in 1828 and died in 1906, and quite a number of cultural events were launched, to celebrate last year's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary (after Shakespeare, Ibsen is the world's second most played author on theatre scenes - cf. <http://www.ibsen.net/>). This paper celebrates Ibsen, too, as a potentially useful resource for business ethics research and teaching. Since Ibsen is frequently played and reasonably well-known, it is not surprising that not to be first, when it comes to using Ibsen in an ethics discussion and teaching context. Norwegian T. Eide for example<sup>2</sup> claims that Ibsen in most of his plays creates "moral characters with moral deficiencies which may make the reader feel, think and reflect... (such as lacking) moral virtue, the ability (or willingness) to recognize elementary moral duties and to act according to these, the ability (or willingness) to see the moral implications or consequences of one's actions and the ability (or willingness) to honour the special obligations of close relationships..." (Eide, 2003, pp. 5-6, quotations shortened by present author). Eide maintains (ibid., p. 6) "... that:

- most of Ibsen's main characters suffer from these kinds of ethical deficiencies, that
- this contributes significantly to the basic moral and existential ambiguity of the actual dramas, and that
- this may also challenge the reader's moral intuitions, emotions and imagination and provoke the reader to ethical reflection and judgement..."

## TWO IBSEN PIECES: AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE AND A DOLL'S HOUSE

Ideally, both teachers and students should watch theatre plays in the theatre. Somewhat less ideally one could buy or rent the respective DVDs and watch the pieces at home. The first mentioned play, *En Folkefiende* (An Enemy of the People) is available as a 2005 Norwegian movie and DVD in Norwegian language (with Norwegian West coast scenery as a backdrop and with subtitles in English – the movie is, however, really close to Ibsen's plot, see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0447638/>). The second play, *Et Dukkehjem* (A Doll's House), is available as a theatre movie and DVD, starring Claire Bloom and Anthony Hopkins (<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0069987/>). Still less ideally, one can use the Ibsen-year website (<http://www.ibsen.net/>) and take a look at the official summary of both pieces.

### *En Folkefiende* (An Enemy of the People – first performed 1883)

Tomas Stockmann is the father of a family and a doctor at a spa in a small Norwegian town. After a lengthy period of analysis he has discovered that the water of the spa that he himself had founded is polluted, and of great danger to the health of all its visitors. The spa is of great importance to the fame and prosperity of the town, but he is convinced that it must be closed until the fault is corrected. To begin with he is praised for his discovery, but when it becomes clear that the improvements will cost the town a great deal, both the press and the inhabitants turn against him. One of his most important opponents is his brother, who is mayor and chief of police, Peter Stockmann. From several quarters the doctor is asked to moderate his absolute demand that the spa be closed, but he calls a public meeting in order to present his case. It has now become the general opinion that the majority is always wrong and the minority always right. The people present at the meeting brand him as an enemy of the people and a threat to the town, and he is forced to leave the meeting. The whole affair has dramatic consequences for his family and himself – his patients desert him, he is dismissed from the spa, his daughter Petra loses her job as a teacher and the family lose their home. His first reaction, in rage and disappointment, is to plan to go abroad with his family, but when people start to break his windows and he receives sinister threats and offers, he realizes how little independence of mind there is in the town. He decides to stay there and devote himself to the task of bringing up citizens with a freer spirit. (<http://www.ibsen.net/index.gan?id=495&subid=0>, translated from Andersen, 1995)

*An enemy of the people* is obviously relevant to business (and citizen) ethics, as a classical introduction to the issue of *whistle-blowing*.<sup>3</sup>

*Et Dukkehjem* (*A Doll's House* – first performed 1879)

Nora Helmer is apparently happily married to Torvald, a lawyer who is about to take over the post of director of the Joint Stock Bank. They have three small children. Nora has a secret to keep, however. Early in their marriage Torvald became seriously ill, and the doctors advised a stay in a more southerly climate. Nora had to get hold of the money for the journey in secrecy and so borrowed it from Krogstad, a lawyer who had been a fellow-student of Torvald's. As security for the loan she forged her dying father's signature. Ever since then she has saved some of the housekeeping money in order to pay back the loan with interest, and she has taken on small jobs to earn some money herself. When the play opens, an old friend of Nora's, Mrs. Linde, has arrived in town to look for work, and Nora sees to it that Torvald gives her a post at the bank. But this means that Krogstad is dismissed from his post at the bank, and in desperation he goes to Nora and threatens to tell Torvald about the loan and the forgery unless he is allowed to keep his post. Nora is in despair but at the same time convinced that in his love for her, Torvald will sacrifice himself and take full responsibility for what she has done, if he learns the truth. Nora considers asking Dr. Rank, an old friend of the family, for the money, but when he declares his love for her, she finds it impossible to ask him. Torvald finds out what has happened, and reacts with rage and revulsion, without any sign of being willing to accept responsibility for the forgery. Mrs. Linde, who was in love with Krogstad in the past, gets him to change his mind and withdraw his threats. But Nora has begun to understand that her marriage is not what she thought it was, and in the course of a dramatic conversation with Torvald she decides that her most important and only task is to go out into the world on her own to "bring herself up", and she leaves her husband and children.

(<http://www.ibsen.net/index.gan?id=497&subid=0>, translated from Andersen, 1995)

*A doll's house* is at least as well-known as *An enemy of the people*, as the classical presentation of a family woman's liberation - *from her wife and mother duties, to discovering her own role-free identity and integrity* (cf. about using this play in teaching e.g. Alexander and Sullivan, 1996; Shade 2004).

## TWO IBSEN SCENES

When it comes to using literature for business ethics teaching, many students are probably skeptical, at least to start with. For such reasons, rather than addressing whole Ibsen plays such as the two plays mentioned, some further narrowing to one scene or two is suggested. (If one thinks that students deserve exposure to whole pieces, a first student assignment could be to isolate the most dense moral conflict situations in a piece and to share the criteria for one's choice). Without such a preparation assignment, more specifically, we'd suggest two scenes from *A doll's house*, both with a rather clear focus on the relationship between law versus morality or, in other words, between not getting caught versus unconditional caring (for the complete text of the two scenes see appendix 1 below).

The *first scene* could be taken more or less directly from the plot summary above. Nora's secret story (told in a dialogue with Krogstad): Early in Nora's marriage with Torvald her husband "became seriously ill, and the doctors advised a stay in a more southerly climate. Nora had to get hold of the money for the journey in secrecy and so borrowed it from Krogstad, a lawyer who had been a fellow-student of Torvald's. As security for the loan she forged her dying father's signature... When Krogstad (several years later risks to be) dismissed from his post at the bank... he goes to Nora and threatens to tell Torvald about the loan and the forgery unless he is allowed to keep his post..." (Andersen, 1995, op. cit.)

The *second scene* needs to be summarized from the raw text of the play. In this second scene, Krogstad has sent and Torvald has just received and read "the letter", telling the story of the loan and the forgery. Taking a combined prosecutor and judge and not least moral judge role towards his wife, Torvald addresses Nora with rage, as a both irresponsible and responsible subordinate (while Nora would have expected or hoped for a loving husband, loving back his wife unconditionally, for fulfilling her moral duty to care for her ill spouse and to protect her dying father). At its end, this scene changes dramatically when a new envelope is returned to Nora and opened by Torvald. The envelope contains the IOU, the loan document, i.e. the legal evidence of the forgery. Torvald's debriefing sounds like him realizing a bad dream. It is not really the forgery as such, but the potential discovery of forgery which would have damaged the family's moral reputation. (As shown in the plot summary above already, Ibsen's Torvald considers the symbolic burning of the evidence as a happy end of a bad dream, while Ibsen's Nora (after her classic reply to Torvald's accusation and then his dropping of the case) leaves her husband, children, family, as a mixed unhappy/happy end).

After having let the students watch or read these two scenes, a business ethics teacher could ask his/her business ethics students to look themselves for principal questions which are raised and illustrated in the two selected scenes (or ask the questions right away):

- Can there be any good moral reasons for (sometimes) breaking the law and risking the sanctions for this?
- Is there a moral establishment and does such establishment and its morality stand critical questions, and what is the response to such critical questions?
- How important are moral facades, e.g. compared to the internal culture or moral climate of a group, in this case of a marital relationship?

### TORVALD'S TEMPTATION AND NORA'S DILEMMA

Before or rather after asking the principal questions, one could also ask the students for an abstraction exercise - to reconstruct and formulate "in their own words" at least two core moral conflict scenarios from the original scenes, in a more or less general, anonymous and everyday language format. Their solution to the task should look similar to the following two conflict scenario descriptions:

*Torvald's temptation:* A husband and bank manager (trained as a lawyer) receives a "letter", telling that his wife some years ago has forged a signature on a private loan document, i.e. committed a clear criminal offence. He has reason to believe that there exists evidence for such a claim and that such evidence could be used for blackmailing him in his work role, namely to re-employ the potential blackmailer (he has as a matter of fact recently fired the person, using the person's forgery a long time ago as a justification). He feels that by giving in to a blackmailer he becomes morally co-responsible. Even more so, he feels very uneasy indeed for being vulnerable, for being exposed to the mercy of a blackmailer. On the other hand, the whole situation is quite unique. If he re-employs the author of the letter this will silence him. Not yielding to the threat or even going public with the letter appears to be uneasy indeed: his public reputation as a good citizen will be hurt for ever, as he sees it.

Should he stick to his principles or should he give in to the temptation, and choose the way of least resistance by re-employing the letter-writer and rather accept a somewhat hurt self-image? Are there other relevant arguments or viable alternatives worth considering? Is the situation altered if the loan document (i.e. the legal evidence of the forgery) is returned, and if yes in which respect and why?

If the whole story (and its morale) has been told already, Torvald risks a biased judgement. For reducing such a possible bias, one could try to read “his” temptation story and try to understand him and his mindset, *before* judging him from hindsight, i.e. Nora’s dilemma story (and her eventual leaving of the doll’s house in spite of the temptation to stay, with a Torvald with a reformed mindset). At least at first sight, Torvald’s point of departure looks Kantian: neither forgery nor yielding to blackmailing stands a categorical imperative test (while the inclination to forget the whole story since it won’t show in public anyway looks much less Kantian).

*Nora’s dilemma:* A man was seriously ill. The only therapy that the doctors thought might save him was taking a leave of absence from his work for a lengthy stay in a warmer country. Such a stay implied a loss of income, and at the same time traveling and staying expenses. The sick husband’s wife, Nora, without any income of her own, couldn’t see any other alternative than borrowing the money, from a distant friend of the family, without telling her husband (who for male self-respect reasons which were normal at that time would not accept money from such a loan). When the creditor asks for a guarantor for the loan, Nora’s only choice, as she sees it, is either asking her dying father for his signature or leaving him in peace and faking his signature for getting the loan.

Should Nora forge the signature for getting the loan and saving her husband’s health and sparing her dying father from sorrows?

One might say that here lies a risk of bias, too – such as interpreting Nora’s dilemma with the hindsight of Torvald’s reaction later in the piece.<sup>4</sup>

#### USING MORAL CONFLICT SCENARIOS FOR ASSESSMENT AND FOR A DEBRIEFING WHICH FOCUSES ON THE INDIVIDUAL STUDENT RESPONSES

Still another teaching possibility is to start with a paper and pencil test, where these (or similar) scenarios, alone or together with additional ones, function as a warm up exercise at the beginning of a business ethics course or a business ethics teaching unit, as projective tests, for assessing the students’ ability and willingness to moral reasoning. One could for example ask the students open questions about the presented situation(s), e.g. to write a short essay about what they would recommend Torvald or Nora (or Heinz) to do, and, not least, which reasons they would give for the recommendations. One could even try to code the answers as an indication of moral maturity, e.g. in the Kohlberg tradition into pre-conventional, conventional

and post-conventional reasoning,<sup>5</sup> or perhaps in the Gilligan tradition as an indication of fairness versus caring concepts of ethics (cf. exhibit #1, referring to Nora's dilemma only).<sup>6</sup>

Kohlberg's levels	Kohlberg's stages	Examples of possible argument focus in Nora's dilemma
<u>pre-conventional</u> (inner-directed = egoistic, ethically questionable)	obedience out of fear	risk of detection and punishment
	instrumental egoism	feeling uneasy about bothering father or husband
<u>conventional</u> (outer-directed, moral conformism)	nice boy/ girl	a good wife would typically do this
	law&order-obedience	forgery is forbidden by law
<u>post-conventional</u> (inner-directed, idealistic and altruistic)	consensus by procedure	this would be unfair towards the creditor
	independent idealism	the health and life of the husband can be a higher core value than the creditor's right
fairness concept of ethics	The essence of this case is how justified one is in special cases to break the law for assumed good principles or purposes	
care concept of ethics	Empathy and doing good or avoiding harm for individuals in need is primary	

**Exhibit #1**

All the different responses, qualitative ones or more standardized ones, would then represent moral maturity differences in the classroom, so to speak the raw material of mindsets addressed by teaching. Having been forced to think through the situation and to find an answer to the questions and writing it down represents a good point of departure for a classroom discussion (even without necessarily summarising and analysing the responses "as data"). In addition to collecting and summarizing the answers to the scenarios, perhaps even interactively, one can ask a number of follow up questions, for each of the conflict situations separately, such as:

- What would you consider to be the most important points made or theses communicated in the Nora's dilemma scene? (Then, if not mentioned clearly...)
- probe more precisely for the students' thoughts about competing moral and legal arguments;
- then, perhaps, ask how the moral heterogeneity in the classroom is perceived (and how one would suggest to handle such heterogeneity);



- then, perhaps, one would ask if the students recall similar situations from their own experience.

Similarly, one could address the Torvald's temptation scene:

- What do you consider to be the most important points made or theses communicated in the Torvald scene? (Then, if not mentioned clearly...)
- probe more precisely for the students' thoughts about the relationship between giving in to or resisting blackmailing pressure or about the relationship between internal moral climate and external moral reputation;
- then again, perhaps, ask how the moral heterogeneity in the classroom is perceived (and how one would suggest to handle such heterogeneity) and if the students recall similar situations from their own experience.

Either one chooses to address both situations after one another first or simultaneously right away, the most interesting approach is probably to ask

- if and how one could read the second scene as Torvald's debriefing after Nora's choice in her dilemma, also,
- perhaps, probe more precisely for the students' thoughts about 19<sup>th</sup> century gender and family roles as an explanation of or even as an excuse of Nora's forgery ("for a good purpose") and of Torvald's response.

The scenes from *A Doll's House* could also be presented later in a business ethics course, e.g. until *after* having addressed various schools of moral philosophy. In such a case, additional questions could be asked, such as if and how one could formulate "typical" consequentialist versus non-consequentialist arguments and standpoints in such cases, perhaps also "traditional" versus "contemporary" philosophical positions (Crane and Matten, 2007).

#### A FEW ADDITIONAL REMARKS ABOUT BUSINESS ETHICS TEACHING

So far this paper can be read as a rather practical suggestion for a business ethics teaching unit, inviting business students to a conflict case discussion and to reflect about maturity differences in moral reasoning, perhaps also about justice versus care ethical reasoning. If such a unit is well-delivered, well de-briefed and eventually leaves some traces in the student mindsets, one could say that it justifies itself – why ask for more? In this section a few more general remarks can be added about the legitimacy of using literature when teaching business ethics to business students.

Business ethics teaching is about reaching one or a few more or less well-defined and well-justified objectives (“why go where?”), addressing business students with a more or less given and more or less heterogeneous mindset (“go from where?”), preferably with some minimum of dialogue about best ways (“don’t go alone!” - cf. Brinkmann and Sims, 2001).

As a short input to such an important dialogue about best ways to teach business ethics we’d like to borrow some thoughts and formulations from a relatively recent paper of Richard Rorty, whose main addressees are business ethicists and whose main focus is on questioning the legitimacy of philosophy and moral philosophy as primary bases of our discipline (Rorty, 2006, esp. pp. 369-375).<sup>7</sup> This reference is chosen because Rorty’s line of argument seems particularly convincing (i.e. “useful” in Rorty’s terminological tradition) if rephrased as a teaching “philosophy” for our field, as a suggestion of most important ends and means. For brevity, his main points can be summarized as follows:<sup>8</sup>

- Business ethics teaching is not an end in itself, but should eventually contribute to world and business world improvement (9, 10).
- The main objective of business ethics teaching is development of
  - moral imagination (4)
  - empathy (5)
  - ability to justify and convince (2, 3)
  - paradigmatic conflict cases (narratives) and context specific guidelines (6)
- The main media of teaching and learning business ethics in such a way are
  - narratives or cases (7) and
  - a diversity of training backgrounds among business ethics teachers (8).

Or in one long sentence: the more it is concerned with moral reflection and moral imagination as a primary objective, the more business ethics teaching should look for suitable literature pieces (such as Ibsen-pieces) and hope that such an approach almost sufficiently will further goal achievement, i.e. moral imagination and empathy development, since the important medium, telling good stories well, is left to the experts: novelists and playwrights.

Singer and Singer market their anthology *The Moral of the Story. An Anthology of Ethics through Literature* (2005) with similar arguments:

“... For philosophers the example is merely a tool, like a piece of equipment for a scientist. As long as it does the job, they have no interest in embellishing it, for they are interested in

abstract questions, not in the specifics... Philosophical examples in ethics usually lack depth, the characters in them are ciphers, and the context is absent or at best, briefly sketched...

Novels, short stories, plays, and poems shed different kinds of light on ethical questions. Some have thought that great literature should be edifying and provide models of good behavior... It is surely true that the detailed and creative exploration of a situation that can emerge from a good novel can help us to understand more about ourselves, and how we ought to live. In contrast to the examples discussed in works of philosophy, discussions of ethical issues in fiction tend to be concrete, rather than abstract, and to give a rich context for the distinctive moral views or choices that are portrayed. Literature therefore often presents a more nuanced view of character and circumstances than is to be found in the works of philosophers..."

(Singer and Singer, 2005, pp. x-xi)

In the end, successful teaching (or should one say marketing?) of business ethics to more or less heterogeneous business students is a question of meeting and respecting the target group's mindset and expectations. The author's own experience suggests that complex, contradictory and perhaps unfinished stories or cases work relatively best. Honest scepticism is more productive than politically correct questions and answers. Favouring sceptical and critical students as a target group does not leave the other students empty-handed either (but leaves them with well-told stories which simply can be read as interesting and entertaining in themselves). The alternative would be worse: boring and *not* satisfying or even frustrating the sceptical and critical students and furthering superficial lip-service moralism rather than reflection among the rest.<sup>9</sup>

## APPENDIX 1: TWO SCENES FROM A DOLL'S HOUSE

The two scenes (which are the main raw material of this paper) read as original-version texts as follows (source: <http://www.enotes.com/dollshouse-text/>):

### 1<sup>st</sup> (selected) scene

*Krogstad.* When your husband was ill, you came to me to borrow two hundred and fifty pounds.

*Nora.* I didn't know any one else to go to.

*Krogstad.* I promised to get you that amount--

*Nora.* Yes, and you did so.

*Krogstad.* I promised to get you that amount, on certain conditions. Your mind was so taken up with your husband's illness, and you were so anxious to get the money for your journey, that you seem to have paid no attention to the conditions of our bargain. Therefore it will not be amiss if I remind you of them. Now, I promised to get the money on the security of a bond which I drew up.

*Nora.* Yes, and which I signed.

*Krogstad.* Good. But below your signature there were a few lines constituting your father a surety for the money; those lines your father should have signed.

*Nora.* Should? He did sign them.

*Krogstad.* I had left the date blank; that is to say your father should himself have inserted the date on which he signed the paper. Do you remember that?

*Nora.* Yes, I think I remember--

*Krogstad.* Then I gave you the bond to send by post to your father. Is that not so?

*Nora.* Yes.

*Krogstad.* And you naturally did so at once, because five or six days afterwards you brought me the bond with your father's signature. And then I gave you the money.

*Nora.* Well, haven't I been paying it off regularly?

*Krogstad.* Fairly so, yes. But--to come back to the matter in hand--that must have been a very trying time for you, Mrs. Helmer?

*Nora.* It was, indeed.

*Krogstad.* Your father was very ill, wasn't he?

*Nora.* He was very near his end.

*Krogstad.* And died soon afterwards?

*Nora.* Yes.

*Krogstad.* Tell me, Mrs. Helmer, can you by any chance remember what day your father died?--on what day of the month, I mean.

*Nora.* Papa died on the 29th of September.

*Krogstad.* That is correct; I have ascertained it for myself. And, as that is so, there is a discrepancy (*taking a paper from his pocket*) which I cannot account for.

*Nora.* What discrepancy? I don't know--

*Krogstad.* The discrepancy consists, Mrs. Helmer, in the fact that your father signed this bond three days after his death.

*Nora.* What do you mean? I don't understand--

*Krogstad.* Your father died on the 29th of September. But, look here; your father dated his signature the 2nd of October. It is a discrepancy, isn't it? (*NORA is silent.*) Can you explain it to me? (*NORA is still silent.*) It is a remarkable thing, too, that the words "2nd of October," as well as the year, are not written in your father's handwriting but in one that I think I know. Well, of course it can be explained; your father may have forgotten to date his signature, and someone else may have dated it haphazard before they knew of his death. There is no harm in that. It all depends on the signature of the name; and *that* is genuine, I suppose, Mrs. Helmer? It was your father himself who signed his name here?

*Nora (after a short pause, throws her head up and looks defiantly at him).* No, it was not. It was I that wrote papa's name.

*Krogstad.* Are you aware that is a dangerous confession?

*Nora.* In what way? You shall have your money soon.

*Krogstad.* Let me ask you a question; why did you not send the paper to your father?

*Nora.* It was impossible; papa was so ill. If I had asked him for his signature, I should have had to tell him what the money was to be used for; and when he was so ill himself I couldn't tell him that my husband's life was in danger--it was impossible.

*Krogstad.* It would have been better for you if you had given up your trip abroad.

*Nora.* No, that was impossible. That trip was to save my husband's life; I couldn't give that up.

*Krogstad.* But did it never occur to you that you were committing a fraud on me?

*Nora.* I couldn't take that into account; I didn't trouble myself about you at all. I couldn't bear you, because you put so many heartless difficulties in my way, although you knew what a dangerous condition my husband was in.

*Krogstad.* Mrs. Helmer, you evidently do not realise clearly what it is that you have been guilty of. But I can assure you that my one false step, which lost me all my reputation, was nothing more or nothing worse than what you have done.

*Nora.* You? Do you ask me to believe that you were brave enough to run a risk to save your wife's life.

*Krogstad.* The law cares nothing about motives.

*Nora.* Then it must be a very foolish law.

*Krogstad.* Foolish or not, it is the law by which you will be judged, if I produce this paper in court.

*Nora.* I don't believe it. Is a daughter not to be allowed to spare her dying father anxiety and care? Is a wife not to be allowed to save her husband's life? I don't know much about law; but I am certain that there must be laws permitting such things as that. Have you no knowledge of such laws--you who are a lawyer? You must be a very poor lawyer, Mr. Krogstad.

*Krogstad.* Maybe. But matters of business--such business as you and I have had together--do you think I don't understand that? Very well. Do as you please. But let me tell you this--if I lose my position a second time, you shall lose yours with me. (*He bows, and goes out through the hall.*)

## 2<sup>nd</sup> (selected) scene

*Helmer.* What is this? Do you know what is in this letter?

*Nora.* Yes, I know. Let me go! Let me get out!

*Helmer (holding her back).* Where are you going?

*Nora (trying to get free).* You shan't save me, Torvald!

*Helmer (reeling).* True? Is this true, that I read here? Horrible! No, no--it is impossible that it can be true.

*Nora.* It is true. I have loved you above everything else in the world.

*Helmer.* Oh, don't let us have any silly excuses.

*Nora (taking a step towards him).* Torvald--!

*Helmer.* Miserable creature--what have you done?

*Nora.* Let me go. You shall not suffer for my sake. You shall not take it upon yourself.

*Helmer.* No tragedy airs, please. (*Locks the hall door.*) Here you shall stay and give me an explanation. Do you understand what you have done? Answer me? Do you understand what you have done?

*Nora (looks steadily at him and says with a growing look of coldness in her face).* Yes, now I am beginning to understand thoroughly.

*Helmer (walking about the room).* What a horrible awakening! All these eight years--she who was my joy and pride--a hypocrite, a liar--worse, worse--a criminal! The unutterable ugliness of it all!--For shame! For shame! (*NORA is silent and looks steadily at him. He stops in front of her.*) I ought to have suspected that something of the sort would happen. I ought to have foreseen it. All your father's want of principle--be silent!--all your father's want of principle has come out in you. No religion, no morality, no sense of duty--How I am punished for having winked at what he did! I did it for your sake, and this is how you repay me.

*Nora.* Yes, that's just it.

*Helmer.* Now you have destroyed all my happiness. You have ruined all my future. It is horrible to think of! I am in the power of an unscrupulous man; he can do what he likes with me, ask anything he likes of

me, give me any orders he pleases--I dare not refuse. And I must sink to such miserable depths because of a thoughtless woman!

*Nora.* When I am out of the way, you will be free.

*Helmer.* No fine speeches, please. Your father had always plenty of those ready, too. What good would it be to me if you were out of the way, as you say? Not the slightest. He can make the affair known everywhere; and if he does, I may be falsely suspected of having been a party to your criminal action. Very likely people will think I was behind it all--that it was I who prompted you! And I have to thank you for all this--you whom I have cherished during the whole of our married life. Do you understand now what it is you have done for me?

*Nora (coldly and quietly).* Yes.

*Helmer.* It is so incredible that I can't take it in. But we must come to some understanding. Take off that shawl. Take it off, I tell you. I must try and appease him some way or another. The matter must be hushed up at any cost. And as for you and me, it must appear as if everything between us were as before--but naturally only in the eyes of the world. You will still remain in my house, that is a matter of course. But I shall not allow you to bring up the children; I dare not trust them to you. To think that I should be obliged to say so to one whom I have loved so dearly, and whom I still-- No, that is all over. From this moment happiness is not the question; all that concerns us is to save the remains, the fragments, the appearance--

*(A ring is heard at the front-door bell.)*

*Helmer (with a start).* What is that? So late! Can the worst--? Can he--? Hide yourself, Nora. Say you are ill.

*(NORA stands motionless. HELMER goes and unlocks the hall door.)*

*Maid (half-dressed, comes to the door).* A letter for the mistress.

*Helmer.* Give it to me. *(Takes the letter, and shuts the door.)* Yes, it is from him. You shall not have it; I will read it myself.

*Nora.* Yes, read it.

*Helmer (standing by the lamp).* I scarcely have the courage to do it. It may mean ruin for both of us. No, I must know. *(Tears open the letter, runs his eye over a few lines, looks at a paper enclosed, and gives a shout of joy.)* Nora! *(She looks at him, questioningly.)* Nora! No, I must read it once again-- Yes, it is true! I am saved! Nora, I am saved!

*Nora.* And I?

*Helmer.* You too, of course; we are both saved, both saved, both you and I. Look, he sends you your bond back. He says he regrets and repents--that a happy change in his life--never mind what he says! We are saved, Nora! No one can do anything to you. Oh, Nora, Nora!--no, first I must destroy these hateful things. Let me see-- *(Takes a look at the bond.)* No, no, I won't look at it. The whole thing shall be nothing but a bad dream to me. *(Tears up the bond and both letters, throws them all into the stove, and watches them burn.)* There--now it doesn't exist any longer. He says that since Christmas Eve you-- These must have been three dreadful days for you, Nora.

*Nora.* I have fought a hard fight these three days.

*Helmer.* And suffered agonies, and seen no way out but--. No, we won't call any of the horrors to mind. We will only shout with joy, and keep saying, "It's all over! It's all over!" Listen to me, Nora. You don't seem to realise that it is all over. What is this?--such a cold, set face! My poor little Nora, I quite understand; you don't feel as if you could believe that I have forgiven you. But it is true, Nora, I swear it; I have forgiven you everything. I know that what you did, you did out of love for me.

*Nora.* That is true.

*Helmer.* You have loved me as a wife ought to love her husband. Only you had not sufficient knowledge to judge of the means you used. But do you suppose you are any the less dear to me, because you don't understand how to act on your own responsibility? No, no; only lean on me; I will advise you and direct you. I should not be a man if this womanly helplessness did not just give you a double attractiveness in my eyes. You must not think any more about the hard things I said in my first moment of consternation, when I thought everything was going to overwhelm me. I have forgiven you, Nora; I swear to you I have forgiven you.

*Nora.* Thank you for your forgiveness. (*She goes out through the door to the right.*)



**APPENDIX 2:**  
**RORTY'S ADVICE FOR TEACHING BUSINESS ETHICS –**  
**BROKEN DOWN INTO 10 THESES**

- #1 Instead of a focus on understanding the world (as most philosophers do) one should rather focus on trying to change it (Rorty, 2006, p. 371, referring to Marx' Feuerbach-thesis);
- #2 "Though truth and wrongness are not relative notions, justification *is*. For what counts as justification... is always relative to the antecedent beliefs of those whom one is seeking to convince..." (p. 371).
- #3 "... The main task of philosophy these days should be to complete the process of secularising culture – to convince people to stop looking for God-surrogates... The right question is ... what is it useful to talk about..." (p. 374)
- #4 Moral imagination is a necessary, perhaps a sufficient condition for creative managerial decision-making. Moral imagination is not a supplement to moral theory and moral reasoning skills, but ... pretty much all you need (pp. 375-376).<sup>10</sup>
- #5 "... An increase in benevolence – in willingness to take the needs of others into account- is possible only when people have enough security and leisure to imagine what it must be like to be someone ... in a very different situation than their own..." (p. 376)
- #6 "Business ethicists might do better to think of themselves as social engineers working on site-specific projects. The two most useful tools for such work... are narratives, whether historical or fictional, and what Laura Nash calls 'context-specific guidelines'..." (Rorty, 2006, p. 377, referring to Nash, 2000).
- #7 "...Whether a narrative is historical or fictional does not matter as much as whether it enables the reader to put herself in the shoes both of those making difficult business decisions and of those affected by such decisions..." (p. 378)
- #8 "The business ethics community ... does not need people with a thorough knowledge of moral theory as much as it needs people who have a journalist's nose for a good story, and a novelist's talent at spinning it... The business ethics community should welcome people with as many different backgrounds as possible..."
- #9 We should "...first dream up a sketch of a better world, and only then try to formulate some principles, which if acted upon, might bring that world into existence" (p. 378)
- #10 "(If not a least a few executives) ... are dreaming up idealistic, utopian scenarios for the formation of a morally decent global society, it is unlikely that such a society will ever come into existence. Perhaps the business ethics community will provide an environment in which such dreams are encouraged..." (p. 379)

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this article was presented at the 13th Annual Conference Promoting Business Ethics, Niagara Falls NY, October 2006. Cf. also a somewhat different Norwegian version of this paper where the same Ibsen scenes share attention with scenes from Brecht's Moral School Operas *The One Who Says Yes* and *The One Who Says No*.

<sup>2</sup> See in addition references such as Fromm, 1947; Levy, 2001; McAdams and Koppensteiner, 1992; Robb, 2002; Weisberg and Duffin, 1995; Woolard, 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. in addition to some of the references mentioned in the previous note Carr, 2003; Leck, 2005; Shepard et al., 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Ethicists and moral psychologists might face a bias, too, since they know the similar well-known classical Heinz' dilemma too well: "A woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to produce. He paid \$200 for the radium and charged \$2,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money, but he could only get together about \$1,000 which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said: "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So Heinz got desperate and broke into the man's store to steal the drug-for his wife." (Kohlberg, 1963) The question is then: *Should Heinz break into the laboratory to steal the drug for his wife? Why or why not?*

<sup>5</sup> As a number of literature references about the use of conflict scenarios as research tools and about the moral maturity research tradition, cf. Brinkmann, 2002, 2005, both with a few further references; Barter and Renold, 1999; Brinkmann and Lentz, 2006; Gibbs et al, 1992; Johnson et al, 1993; Kennedy and Lawton, 1996; MacLagan and Snell, 1992; McCabe et al, 1991; Morris and McDonald, 1995; Lysonski and Gaidis, 1991; Randall and Gibson, 1990; Robertson, 1993; Smith and Rogers, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Since Heinz' dilemma and Nora's dilemma are strikingly similar (apart from gender), one could even investigate if the answers and reasons vary by the gender of the dilemma owner as well as by the gender of the respondent. See as a few references about the use of Heinz' dilemma as a research tool Bergman, 2002; Caputo, 2000; Commons et al, 2006; Halliday, 2002; Rau and Weber, 2003; Reimer, 2003; Wendorf et al, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> For philosopher defences and objections to such criticism cf. De George's, Koehn's and Werhane's responses in the same Business Ethics Quarterly-issue (#3, vol. 16).

<sup>8</sup> See appendix 2 below with a tentative reconstruction of 10 "theses" (the numbers below refer to thesis numbers in the appendix). We leave it to the reader if such a teaching philosophy should be one ingredient in a pluralistic mix of approaches (as suggested for instance by Crane and Matten, 2007) or something close to what Gustafson (2000) calls "postmodern business ethics" equal following four principles (pp. 652-653, author's paraphrase):

1. a holism desire, e.g. no separation personal vs. professional ethics;
2. instead of abstract, context-free business ethics, rather look at life narratives and analogies;
3. suspicious of universal theories: build consensus in situations rather than build one-size-fits-any-situation;
4. no quests for ethical certainty, but respect pluralism, stay sceptical and flexible.

<sup>9</sup> And if there are still student complaints about the lack of clear answers one could refer to what Gustafson has called the "ambiguous world" - which philosophers and business people have in common (2000, p. 651).

<sup>10</sup> Rorty quotes and adopts Werhane's definition of moral imagination (1999, p. 93): "the ability in particular circumstances to discover and evaluate possibilities not merely determined by that circumstance, or limited by its operative mental models, or merely framed by a set of rules or rule-governed concerns..." (Rorty, 2006, p. 376). About moral imagination as a business ethics and business ethics teaching focus without Rorty's radicalization, cf. first of all Werhane, 1999 and 1998, also Ciulla, 1991, 1998 and Vidaver-Cohen, 1998